

The Righteous Life - Listen and Do!

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[0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. And Father, we pray tonight that you would help us listen. But more than that, that you would help us do. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, my brother and I, Matthew is his name, we look quite similar. So on the first slide is a picture of us when we were young. Now, I don't know, can you tell which one I am? Yeah, the one on the right, that's right.

Okay, we look very similar growing up. In fact, when I first met my wife, Michelle, we met at church. And the second time she came, I wasn't there.

And she started talking to my brother, thinking it was me. And was wondering why I wasn't excited to see her. What's more, my brother and I, we sound the same on the phone.

So when his girlfriend first started phoning, I thought I'd have some fun with this. I kind of said to, you know, start a conversation, how are you going? And then I said, oh, what on earth were you wearing the other day?

[1 : 0 1] And, yeah, landed my brother in some hot water. But the point is, there's a family likeness. And we know that, don't we, in our own families.

We're alike, my brother and I, because we're in the same family. Last week, we ended up thinking about trials. And with the last letter P, you remember, the sermon was brought to you by the letter P.

For persevere with the crown of life in sight, which was verse 12. But also with God's goodness in mind. So please have your Bibles open. We're going to be working through the text.

And have a look there back at chapter 1, verse 16. Because God's goodness was particularly expressed by the way he has given us new birth into his family.

So verse 16. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

[1 : 5 8] He chose to give us new birth through the word of truth, that we might be kind of firstfruits of all he created.

You see, God's goodness here is seen by the gifts he gives. And the greatest gift is new birth. New birth into his family with life eternal.

But how did God do this? Well, James tells us, doesn't he, in verse 18. He says, through the word of truth. That is, through the gospel word about Jesus, which speaks of Jesus' death and resurrection for us.

You see, because of Jesus, God forgives us and says, I now declare you innocent. I now declare you righteous in my sight. One of the family, with all the privileges that come with that.

And in response now, we're to act like it. Now that we're in the family, we're to try and reflect the family likeness. Now that we have been declared righteous, we're meant to live out righteous lives.

[2 : 59] We see that in verse 20 of our passage tonight. He says, you know, human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. You see, through Jesus, his death and resurrection for us, we're now righteous in God's eyes, as I said.

And so now we are to live like it. We're in the language of verse 18. We've been given new birth into his family. And so now we have reflect the family likeness. This is the idea that sits behind or underneath this passage tonight.

And in our passage tonight, James gives us three ways that we are to do this. And the first way to live a righteous life is to restrain speech and anger. Point one, verse 19.

It says, my dear brothers and sisters, take note of this. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. Because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

James begins this new section with the words, my brothers and sisters. And then he says, be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry. Why? Well, it's pretty clear, isn't it?

[4 : 06] Verse 20, because our anger does not produce righteous living. Now, just to be clear, there is a right anger that we ought to have. When we hear of a Nigerian Islamic group kidnapping 200 schoolgirls and holding them captive, that should make us both sad and angry.

When we see injustice in the world, that should make us angry. There is a just anger that is right. But James is talking about the type of anger where we lose our temper.

And that is not right. And so if we're to reflect the family likeness, to live the righteous life that God desires, then we ought to be slow to speak, slow to become angry.

Indeed, this is what God is like himself. God declared his character to Moses. And so on the next slide from Exodus 34, we read this. God declares the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, and slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness.

See, if we were to reflect God's likeness, then we too ought to be slow to anger, that we might be righteous like God, who has a right anger at sin and doesn't lose his temper type of anger that we have.

[5 : 18] But why does James start with this? I mean, if he wants us to reflect the family likeness, to live righteous lives, why start with restraining our speech and anger? I mean, why not just skip straight to obeying the Bible, which is where he'll end up in a moment anyway.

Why start with this? Well, because this was a particular problem his readers had. You see, they were undergoing trials and suffering. We saw that last week, didn't we?

And when you're doing it tough, you tend to get grumpy. I mean, guys are particularly notorious for this. We even have the man flu, right? It's a normal flu, but for us, we're suffering and we get grumpy and it's okay because it's a special type of man flu.

And when you do it tough, it is easy to lash out. It's easy to envy others who are not doing it tough, who seem to have everything. And it seems that's what James' readers were doing.

So, for example, in chapter 1, verse 26, towards the end of our reading, he talks about speech. He says, Or over the page in chapter 3, you've got that famous chapter, chapter 3, all about taming the tongue.

[6 : 32] I pick it up in verse 9. He says, You see, they've got a problem with this speech, don't they?

Or chapter 4, verse 1. Chapter 4, verse 1. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire, but you do not have.

So you kill. You covet, but you cannot get what you want. So you quarrel and fight. And on it goes. Chapter 4, verse 11. Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another.

Anyone who speaks against their brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. You see, James' readers, because of their trials that they're undergoing, it seems to have turned them on each other.

As such that they were envying one another, being angry with one another, speaking poorly towards one another. And this is why James starts our passage tonight by saying, be quick to listen, but slow to speak.

[7 : 39] Slow to become angry. Because this was a real problem for his readers. But if we're honest, it can be a problem for us too, can't it? It may not be as bad as it was for James' readers, but we too can lose our temper.

We too can say things too quickly that are unloving. And that does not lead to righteous living, does it? Just two months ago, down in Roveville, just past one turner, there was an incident of road rage reported by Nine News.

So on the next slide, we'll see if it works. Children in the Holden Rodeo open the doors in panic. One fleeing along the median strip dangerously close to traffic, but is told to get back in the car.

The men trade insults, then walk back to their vehicles until another barrage of abuse. Just for everybody's sake, I'm video recording this. The driver of the Toyota pulls up next to the Holden at the lights and a drink is hurled from the four-wheel drive.

Then it's on again. The Holden drive... I'm not sure what punching the car achieved. But this is exactly what James is arguing against, isn't it?

[8 : 50] You know, quick to speak, quick to become angry, and it just escalates. And before we laugh or shake our heads at how ridiculous that behaviour was, how many times has our temper got the better of us?

How many times have we said or thought or done things that are unrighteous because we were quick to speak or quick to become angry? I'm sure most of us have regretted speaking too quickly.

I mean, who hasn't had that experience of that anger welling up inside us and we just spew forth words and then it's too late? So many sins of the tongue happen because we've been too quick to speak, whether it's gossip or swearing or negative comments or general anger.

Now, if we have done this, then we need to ask for forgiveness, both from God and from the person we've hurt. And we also need to be ready to forgive others who have said unrighteous things to us because we're just as guilty.

But we also need to be quick to listen, which primarily refers here to listening to other people, although listening to God's word might be included. The first century rabbis used to say, people have two ears and one tongue, so they should listen twice as much as they speak.

[10 : 07] We need to be quick to listen to each other, but slow to speak, slow to become angry. Often, and not always, but often, the wisest person in the room is the one who sits and listens and speaks least.

It's a bit cheeky. I tried to point this out to my wife once when she was talking at me. Not a good idea. Obviously, I need to be even slower to speak. But James, you see, he wants us to be quick to listen, slow to speak.

After all, there may be a kernel of truth in what the person is saying, which we need to hear. And even if there is no truth in what they're saying, being slow to speak will help us restrain our anger and any unhelpful speech that might spew forth.

Well, we are to restrain our speech in anger because, verse 20, it does not produce the righteousness that God desires. The second way we are to live the righteous life is by ridding ourselves of worldliness.

Point to verse 21. He says, Therefore, because God wants you to live a righteous life, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you.

[11 : 24] The first part of the verse talks about getting rid of all worldliness because it is incompatible with who we are now. We have been made righteous in God's sight, so how can we persist in living unrighteous lives?

We've been given new birth into his family, so how can we keep living as though we are part of the world's family? I remember when I was a teenager going to a party and there came time for dessert and I noticed the kid next to me got some ice cream and then put tomato sauce on top of the ice cream.

Now, I know tomato sauce goes with just about everything, but not ice cream, surely. They just don't go together. They are incompatible. How much more so is godliness and worldliness?

They just don't go together. In fact, if we try to live both ways at the same time, then do you know what God calls it? Have a look at chapter 4, verse 4, to see what God calls it.

Over the page. Here, James' readers are trying to live worldly and godly lives at the same time. Chapter 4, verse 4, and God says, You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God?

[12 : 39] Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. It's pretty severe language, really, isn't it? You adulterous people.

You see, it's one or the other. If we try living both ways, then it's like we're cheating on God. And it can make us his enemy. And so, says James, if we want to live a righteous life, then get rid of all that worldliness.

And on the flip side, we are to accept God's word, which brings us to point 3, and the rest of verse 21. Remember verse 21, he says, Get rid of the moral filth, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Now, I think verse 21 is probably the key verse for this letter. And it's really just two sides of the one coin. That is, point 2 and point 3 really go together.

You see, if we're to live righteous lives, then on the one side, we are to get rid of all the worldliness. And on the flip side, we are also to accept God's word, which can save us.

[13 : 41] You see, this word of the gospel, this message about Jesus, has given us new birth into God's family. It has been implanted in us. And God has saved us through it.

For when we heard the message about Jesus and believed in him, we were saved. And we will be saved on that last day through that same message about Jesus, through Jesus.

But you see, we're not in heaven yet. So we need to keep trusting in Jesus. We need to keep listening to him in his word. We need to keep accepting him in our lives.

I don't know if you've ever watched those medical shows, you know, where they do all sorts of surgeries. Sometimes they get a transplant kidney or whatever it is, and they implant the new kidney or lung into the patient.

And the doctors are really worried at that point whether the body of the patient will accept or reject the new organ. Because if it's rejected, then the patient's life is in danger again.

[14 : 44] But if the body accepts the new organ, then the body continues to live and grow. Well, so too with the gospel. The word of the gospel has been implanted in us and it has given us new birth.

But we ought to keep accepting it and not reject it. Because if we reject the gospel, if we reject Jesus, then our life is in danger. Instead, we ought to keep on accepting Jesus as Lord.

We ought to keep on accepting the word of the gospel with all its implications taught in the Bible. And notice James says that we're to do this humbly. And this means instead of sitting in judgment of God's word and picking and choosing what we like and don't like, we must humbly sit under God's word and let it be the authority in our lives.

And I'm ashamed to say that a lot of ministers need to learn this lesson. They bow to the peer pressure of culture and they reinterpret the scriptures to mean something that it clearly doesn't mean.

No, no. Humbly accepting the word means sitting under God's word, not sitting over it. Now, I've heard other people, not just ministers, but people in church say, well, I don't like the teaching about predestination.

[15 : 54] It usually is. So even though God says it in the Bible, I don't like it, so I'm not going to accept it. That's not humbly accepting God's word, is it? Rather, humble acceptance means accepting all of God's word.

It means being willing to admit, I'm wrong and God's right. Even if we don't understand it, even if we don't agree with it, it means doing what it says.

And that's where James goes in verse 22. Verse 22, he says, do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. I thought at this point I'd give you a little test.

I even have a prize, which I left in my office, big Freddo frog, for the first one finished. Okay, so on the slide. Ready? Go. Go. I saw one hand.

Two hands. Okay. Now, I was actually waiting for someone to say, hey, TD, but you're all too clever. It's pretty good. I used to be a teacher and I used this exercise to teach kids to read and do the instructions, to make sure they'd follow the instructions properly.

[17 : 06] But it was amazing how many kids I had hopping on one foot and crowing like roosters. But so often, this is what we do when it comes to God's word, isn't it? We listen or read it and then don't do it.

And if we think we're being wise by listening to the word without doing it, then James says, you're having yourself on. You're deceiving yourselves, verse 22. You won't be wise. You'll be as foolish as a person hopping on one foot and crowing like a rooster.

In fact, James has his own foolish illustration for us. He says in verse 23, anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and then after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

Now this guy is really foolish. I mean, he not only looks in the mirror but looks for some time. In fact, the word for look here means to consider, to observe carefully.

What's more, the word for face here refers to your natural face, as most faces do. And the one he sees in the mirror, he's seen millions of times before. That's the point. And so not only does he look carefully at his own face, he already knows his face.

[18 : 20] He's had it for years and yet as soon as he walks away, immediately forgets what he looks like. The illustration is meant to be near impossible.

Only a real fool could do this. But that's the point. Only a real fool would read the word and not do what it says. Kind of reminds you of another illustration about a wise and foolish builder, doesn't it?

Do you remember that story that Jesus told? Some of it's on the next slide. Jesus said, Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

James is saying a similar thing here. Only a fool would listen and not do. On the other hand, the wise person will do both and be blessed. See verse 25.

But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it, not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it, they will be blessed in what they do.

[19 : 32] See, this person is like the wise builder. They look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, that is into the gospel that gives us freedom from sin and fulfills the law of God.

The gospel that teaches us to live with Jesus as Lord. They look intently into this word and they don't forget it, but they do it. They live it out with all its implications.

I remember asking a Bible study group from our church this question on the next slide. Is the purpose of reading the Bible to understand it? Now, our first reaction is, well, yes.

But no. Not according to James. The purpose of reading the Bible is to understand and do it. See, the scriptures are not here just so that we can grow our understanding and intellect in our theological matrix and so on and so on.

No, no. It's there so that we might follow it and be transformed by it. You see, it's by doing God's word that we are transformed more into the likeness of Jesus.

[20 : 42] It's by doing it that we think God's thoughts after him. It's by doing the word that we reflect the family likeness, which is the blessing. To be like Christ is blessed.

And it's by doing God's word that we will be transformed to the likeness of Christ and so be blessed. And just in case we haven't got the point about doing, he gives us three final examples in verses 26 to 27.

Do you see that in your Bibles? He says, By religion here, James means real faith, real Christianity, if you like.

And James is saying, if you really are saved, if you really are a Christian, then you'll show up by the way we live. We'll show up by restraining our tongues. We'll show up by the way we care for the poor and oppressed.

And we'll show up by the way we try and keep ourselves from being polluted or literally spotless from the world. These are all the things that James' readers struggle with, which we'll see over in the coming weeks.

[22 : 04] But the point is, they all require action, doing something. James is saying, if we really want to reflect the family likeness, then don't just listen to the word.

Whether it's at church or Bible study at home, we'd do more than that. We'd also do what it says. Does anyone know what the slogan for Nike is?

On the next slide. Yeah, they stole it from James. Silly joke. We're to listen and do God's word. You got it?

It's pretty clear. Now, having said all that, it's actually easier to hear than do, isn't it? So let's pray for God's help to do it. Let's pray. Now, gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word, particularly your word in the gospel through which you have saved us, through which you have given us new birth into your family, through which you have made us righteous in your sight.

Father, help us to live out this word, to do what it says, that we might reflect the family likeness and live the righteous life that you desire.

[23 : 21] And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.